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STATE PASS TO USAID FOR AID/ANE, AID/DCHA/DG
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SUBJECT: POSITIVE REACTIONS TO PRESIDENTIAL PAG IN KANDAHAR

¶1. SUMMARY: (SBU) According to a sampling of official, press, and political analyst reactions to President Karzai's December 11-13 PAG visit to Kandahar, most Afghans viewed his visit to the South positively. They felt it was about time he criticized Pakistan publicly and want him and his Ministers to travel more extensively around the country. Foreign media question how long the positive effect will last, given the ongoing instability in the South. The series of shuras that Karzai held in the South seemed to have the biggest impact and his criticism of Pakistan had particular resonance among tribal elders and attendees. END SUMMARY

Official Reaction

¶2. (SBU) MFA Gender and Human Rights Office Director, Zohra Rasekh, praised Karzai for traveling to Kandahar and for blaming Pakistan for Afghanistan's instability. She said that Afghans were very angry at Pakistan. Taking a stand like Karzai did helped alleviate some of the pressure that had been building among Afghan attitudes towards Pakistan. She and others want the President to travel more around the country.

Afghan and International Media

¶3. (SBU) Initial reactions in the Afghan press were positive, especially in response to the sections of the speech on Pakistan. Reaction covered by the media (both state run and private media) has included commentary saying that not only did people approve of what Karzai said, but they were also impressed by his recent shows of emotions that demonstrate how he has been personally affected by what is going on in the country.

¶4. (SBU) Commentary from Radio Azadi based on on-the-street interviews with people in Kandahar was also positive. Many were impressed that Karzai had gone to Kandahar and were pleased that he spoke with the average person there, particularly regarding his message on Pakistan and the

symbols of GOA support he brought to Kandahar. Most provided little detail on what they approved of or saw as positive, but the act of going to Kandahar and holding public events and meetings appears to have resonated, although it remains to be seen how long or how deep that reaction will last.

15. (SBU) On the international media front, it was a mixed bag. Several journalists commented that the overall optic may have been positive on the street, although they question how much impact it will have, given the continued negative stories coming out about foreign military actions on the ground -- all of which may serve (according to international media that accompanied the President) to highlight the inability of the GOA to provide aid and assistance to the people in the South.

View from the South

16. (SBU) The shuras that Karzai held after the PAG seem to have had the biggest impact in Kandahar itself. Governor Assadullah organized a Panjwayi-specific shura the evening of December 12 with a good representation of all the tribal elders and leaders. The conversation -- focused on security in Kandahar -- was reportedly so successful that they continued the discussion on December 13. There was also a second shura between Karzai and elders/leaders from the South more generally (about 1000 people). Karzai was reportedly very engaged, "realizing he was needed", according to the Dutch RC-South POLAD. The heavy emphasis on Pakistan (and on convoy procedures) was indeed aimed at appeasing public sentiments in Kandahar, as ordinary people in the south are very quick to blame Pakistan for insecurity.

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17. (SBU) At a political gathering in Kandahar sponsored by Cheragh (a daily newspaper) on the upcoming cross-border Jirga, press and political analysts offered thoughts on Karzai's trip to Kandahar. Jawad Sarwari, a reporter for Cheragh Daily, who accompanied the President to Kandahar said it was the first time Karzai made such important, strong, and impressive remarks about the Pakistani government and their purported interference in Afghanistan. The reporter felt that Karzai showed strong leadership by talking to the public and students in Kandahar, particularly when Karzai said that "the Russians, British, Alexander The Great, and Genghis Khan could not occupy this land, the land of Afghans. How can Pakistanis think of turning us into their slaves?" Sarwari said that Karzai shouldn't have cried during his recent Human Rights Gathering. Rather, he should have showed more strength in confronting human rights violations in the country. A good leader never cries, said Sarwari.

18. (SBU) Some political analysts believe the trip to Kandahar was more of a "power show", as Karzai was under tremendous pressure from the international community, especially the U.S., to speak up and show his ability to fight terrorism and the insurgency in the region. However, his speech was a total surprise for most of the Kandaharis, as most did not think he was willing to say such things against the Pakistani government. Some thought Karzai had forgotten about Kandahar and its people. One person said he wished Karzai would have said such things three years ago, then Afghanistan would not be facing all these suicide bombings and terrorist attacks in Kandahar. The province would be in better condition now, said a Kandahari man to a journalist. Because Karzai appeared in public and went to several shops without having his American bodyguards with him as in the past, people felt he was no longer afraid to be among his own people. Generally, people felt happy that Karzai showed he was still committed to the people and used tough words against Pakistan. They also liked his encouraging their children to go to school and learn more and to never give up.

Some Criticism

¶9. (SBU) Not everyone was pleased with Karzai,s remarks on Pakistan, however. Sayed Ishaq al Gailani, MP, echoed the views of others in urging Karzai and his Vice Presidents to travel more to bring the government to the people. Gailani criticized the two deputies for not traveling at all, which has "really hurt the President,s image outside of Kabul". Gailani also was not happy that Karzai heaped "all the blame on Pakistan,s neck" for Afghanistan,s problems. He pointed to other countries in the region that were interfering in Afghanistan,s internal affairs and who were promoting their own agenda, notably Iran. He said that such condemnation of Pakistan sent a confusing signal to Afghans and to the GOP, given that FM Kasuri was warmly welcomed in Kabul just days earlier.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) The Presidential PAG,s visit to the South certainly resonated with those who want to see more GOA presence in the region and among those who blame Pakistan for Afghanistan,s instability. To sustain the much needed sense of presidential engagement and outreach engendered by this visit, we plan to work with the PAG to schedule more such events in the South, led by not just the President, but by his Ministers as well, e.g., Wardak on security and Zia on reconstruction and development. We will, however, continue to urge the Afghans to temper public remarks critical of Pakistan and focus on how the two countries can work together to stem terrorism.

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